

## Writing Technologies: A Mystery

By Patrick Lee

It was just after noon when I got the call from my sister Elsa. I was at the downtown deli getting some lunch, but when duty calls, someone has to answer the phone. Life as a detective in Literacy City can be rough, especially since the cops come to me with all of their hardest cases. I've worked everything from murder to adultery, but this was a riddle to top them all.

Unfortunately, the pay wasn't great in the city, so I operated my agency out of my flat with my sister as my secretary. I walked in, and Elsa told me that there was a dame in the living room waiting for me.

I was greeted with the lingering smoke of cigarettes and a broad with long legs and a short dress. I knew the smoke well and I knew the girl better, but I had quit them both long ago. Her name was Britta, from a very different period of my life, but that's a story for another time. She was sitting in my chair holding a pencil, quietly scribbling in her journal, but she heard my footsteps and looked up.

"You better be here on business, Britta," I said coldly. She looked at me with a hurt look, trying to shake me, but she realized it wasn't going to work this time, so she rubbed out her Marlboro and cut to the chase. "Someone is burning down my stores. The cops think someone wants to stop computer use."

Britta was the heiress to a computer store empire, and since literature is the primary export of the city, she made decent dough from all the writers. Once upon a time, she was an aspiring writer herself, but Britta never had the talent to compete with other up-and-coming writers, and with her new job as the head of her business, she'd been pretty busy. But there had been rumors of resistance coming up from the underground against computers and, by association, her stores. Word had been spreading about the pro-pencil, anti-electronics movement happening here in the city, but little was known about it. The group had been silent until this point, but it sounded like they had finally made their move. If her stores kept getting burned down, people wouldn't be able to get computers; then no typing could happen, and the city would be in chaos. I didn't like helping Britta—I have a thing against exes—but this was for the good of Literacy City, so I took the job.

Britta left my house, and I sat down at the kitchen table where Elsa was eating her lunch. My plan was to find out how different people think about literacy technologies in order to track down the underground movement and find out who was behind the arsons. I had to start somewhere, so I asked Elsa some questions. She was older than me by a few years, so I felt like she could give me a different perspective about writing technologies.

She told me her story from the top. As a kid learning how to write, she used crayons, and then moved on to pencils, pens, and then computers. She said she switched tools as each became more convenient than the previous one. I asked her what she used most often and she said computers and their word processing programs, but when I brought up texting, she admitted to using that technology frequently as well. I asked what writing technologies changed her habits the most; she simply answered, "The computer." This all made sense to me. Elsa was always texting, or writing on her blog, and she always used a computer for all her academic papers. I brought up the movement and Elsa told me that she was against the anti-technologies movement, because in her opinion computers have helped literacy overall, as well as her own personal writing habits. She then recommended that I check out my contacts downtown to hear the word on the street.

I went down to the corner by the local 7-Eleven and saw Gates, my old college roommate. He was wearing a grey sweatshirt and had a hood covering his bald head. He typically knew what the cops didn't, so I asked him about the movement. He wasn't talking, but an Arnold Palmer from the convenience store won him over. Gates accepted the payment and pointed me in the direction of the docks, one of the city's oldest landmarks and one of its seediest too. I've had to go there on many leads over the years, and this was one more. Gates told me that Yumi Lee, a Korean woman with connections to the underground movement, was often seen hanging around there.

I was just about to leave when I realized I didn't have a third-party perspective from my generation about writing technologies, so I turned around and shot some questions at Gates. Unlike my sister, he favored pencil lead over crayons when he learned to write. But then he moved on to pens and computers, just

like Elsa. He told me as computers became more common, he started using them more. And as for why pens over pencils, he said that it was just an issue of reliability. When I asked about the most influential writing technology, Gates could only say computers. He said they're a faster way to write, and that it's easier to edit with them, which is why they are so influential in terms of writing. But Gates also brought up the fact that technology such as cell phones and the Internet are likely hurting literacy, as seen by all the shorthand and misspelling kids use daily.

I left with Gates' words in my head. As I drove to the docks I started noticing the patterns. Young people of my generation tend to grow out of regular writing tools and accept computers as the main medium of writing. They also think highly of computers in terms of literacy and find them influential in a good way.

Around sunset, I rolled up to the docks and walked until I found the lady I was looking for. Yumi was a short, curly-haired woman who looked quite uninviting, but when did that ever stop a private eye? She was sitting alone on a bench looking out at the sea, writing some kind of report. I sat down beside Yumi and tried making small talk with her, but she clearly didn't want any of it. When I turned the conversation to writing technologies, she knew I was asking because of her connections to the movement.

Luckily, Yumi was cooperative, willing to dish about her childhood in Korea roughly fifty years ago, about how she used a chalkboard because they had nothing else. A bit after graduating high school, she moved to America, where she started working with pencils and paper. Then, years later, once computers became a part of the workplace, she had to use them, but she said she still finds them difficult to use and confusing. This definitely had something to do with the cultural and generational differences between Yumi's and my generation. With English being her second language, she has a few hurdles when it comes to writing. Yumi then claimed that computers are hurting literacy because kids rely on spell checks and such, and don't know how to actually write. She values old tools over pixel technologies, but she doesn't harbor a hate against computers. After all, she said, she still needs them for her job, and she has three kids to support. At this point I realized that Yumi and the movement weren't behind the arsons. Yumi made a point; she still needed a computer to type because that's the kind of culture we live in. The movement didn't have the incentive to do something as drastic as mass arson, but I knew someone who did.

I sped over to Britta's place and burst through the door. Through the smell of her cig smoke, I caught the scent of gasoline, not that I needed more confirmation. I walked into the living room, where Britta sat with her journal. I reached for her pack of menthols on the nearby coffee table. I pulled out a cigarette, and asked, "Got a light?"

She sighed as she saw the look in my eyes, "So you finally figured it out, huh?" And I had; it had just taken some time to piece it all together. Britta was bitter about her failed writing career; she just couldn't compete with young talent. So she decided to take out their main method of writing: computers. The first clue was how Gates and Elsa, both young adults, had an acute liking for computers. The second was that despite hating computers, Yumi still accepted them for the sake of her job. The movement was never the problem, just a red herring. But what finally tipped me off was the fact that the heiress of a computer store empire was writing with a pencil and journal while she had the world of computers at her fingers. Britta was already wealthy, so she could just ditch the company and follow her dreams.

Britta chuckled and passed me her lighter. "I don't suppose I can convince you to not call the cops on me, for old time's sake." I lit the cigarette and exhaled, slowly. "You supposed right; I called them on the way over." I turned from her and walked away, out the door to the cold city street. Just another day, and another crime solved in Literacy City.

#### Works Cited

- Gates, Christopher. Personal interview. Sept. 2010.  
Lee, Elsa M. Telephone interview. Sept. 2010.  
Lee, Yumi B. Personal interview. Sept. 2010.